

## Payne's dense visuals in a new light

Exhibition: **ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS** by Malcolm Payne at the UCT Irma Stern Museum, Rosebank, until March 12. **MELVYN MINNAAR** reviews.

OVER HIS distinguished, 30-year exhibition career, Payne has frequently offered a first impression that his art is too opaque for his own good. One is instantly lured by magical visuals, and then, once confronted close-up by strangeness, left to sort it all out for oneself to make up the sense.

This new, literally dazzling, show of large-scale computer-generated, hyper-contrived, micro/macro-designed prints – exquisitely executed in state-of-the-art multicolour inkjet pigment print on Hahnemühle cotton rag paper – is very much a contemporary update on that Payne process.

It is also something to behold: hectic, colourful visions of energy that bamboozle your eyes and make your head spin. It is like peering into a grand kaleidoscope and then having to put it down for the images to sink in.

In execution, this is classic Payne bravura, with characteristic attention to detail and compelling presence – now with more than a dash of flamboyance.

In visual intrigue, the obscurity is no less challenging, even though the components that he morphs, multiplies, manipulates and tangos with from out of space, to earth and back again, all are as familiar as that which we all find in our family backroom cupboards.

(In fact, in a chippy deed of playfulness, he offers us all the unadulterated bits and pieces used in the visual constructions in the need catalogue accompanying the show.)

It's as if he challenges us to invent our own dreams accordingly from these mementos.

From his début, Payne established himself as a sign-maker: his art is one of gestures, operating as visual language. Mostly, these marks have found viewer resonance, succeeded in hitting their target.

Payne's art operates somewhere between the visual vernacular such as the ritual signs and mystery made by people such as the Aborigines or our own African cave inhabitants and the "subconscious inventions" of conceptualists like the American Cy Twombly.

It is, in essence, particularised, self-owned.

In her catalogue essay Pippa Skotnes agrees that Payne's work is shifty to the cerebral grip, and talks about "the poetics of wonder that his work circumscribes".

This is a wondrous world that the viewer will be well advised to explore more by association than by trying to figure out the powerful ocular puzzles.

While it is true that, as Skotnes suggests, there is plenty that opens up when one contemplates individual pieces (not easy, given the abundance – overload? – on show) and its multiple social and other references, it is when you allow yourself to be swept along by the hallucinatory nature of the virtuosic visual trickery, the hypnotic play, that one starts to connect with and admire Payne's "poetics of wonder".

The title of the show – actually an ongoing project of the artist – refers, of course, to those intriguing, highly-decorated, ritually-powerful medieval scripts. (Skotnes makes some thoughtful connections in her essay.)

One can read it here also to mean that Payne's quests and dense visual language have taken a contemporary turn, shown in a new, glowing light.

*Illuminated Manuscripts* must be read.